Alternative Cinema Conference Struggling for unity

by Chuck Kleinhans, Ellen Seiter, and Peter Steven

400 media activists meet at Alternative Cinema Conference

Four hundred film and video activists met at Bard College in New York State from June 12-17 at the first U.S. Conference for an Alternative Cinema for what turned out to be the most important national gathering of progressive media workers since the 1930s. Because the events at Bard are crucial to JUMP CUT's political activity, we are providing extensive coverage in this issue and the next one. To provide an historical background and political context for the Alternative Cinema Conference, John Hess surveys progressive American filmmaking in the 60s and 70s. Then we offer an overview report on the conference, followed by individual statements by some JUMP CUT staff members who attended. San Francisco photographer Dolores Newman's photos accompany the report.

We are aware that the history and reports do not adequately deal with the film and video work of Black, Hispanic, Asian, aid Native people, and we are committed to improving JUMP CUT in this area. We invite advice and criticism that can help us.

In our next issue we plan to print many of the position papers and resolutions from the meeting, further analyses of what happened at Bard and since then on the local, regional and national levels. As part of JUMP CUT's continued commitment to independent political film and video making, we invite people who attended the conference to add their views, and people who didn't make it to respond to the issues raised. We'd like concise statements, typed and double spaced, sent to our Chicago office by January 1 for inclusion in the next issue.

In the meantime, copies of conference resolutions are $1.00 each, programs $2, directories of participants $2, from Alternative Cinema

Conference, 192 Broadway, room 708, New York NY 10038. The conference office can also put you in touch with people trying to organize local and regional continuations of the conference.

— The Editors

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Conference report: struggling for unity

In mid-June while driving to the U.S. Conference for an Alternative Cinema, the car radio announced John Wayne's death. Drawing the connection was irresistible: the death of conservative patriarchy foreshadowed the birth of a new and powerful radical film movement. But, aside from this coincidence providing the basis for a few good jokes the first days of the conference, most of the people there had pretty realistic expectations of what such a gathering could do.

GUARDED OPTIMISM

Jesus Trevino, in a pre-conference issue of the *Chicano Cinema Newsletter* (June '79):

> "The prospect of bringing together filmmakers whose films touch on areas ranging from ecology to feminism, to labor, to the black experience, to the Chicano and Puerto Rican experiences, to all of the many and varying socioeconomic realities of this country and the potential of putting the collective energies, ideas and political clout of these filmmakers to work for a common goal is both exciting and encouraging. However, the conference participants must be careful not to allow raised expectations to undermine what is possible given the realities and people [and] politics of the many divergent groups and interests who will attend ... Obstacles there will be, and many. Perhaps foremost will be the diversity of political, social and ethnic backgrounds each conferee brings to the discussions. Various levels of political understanding, experience and specific individual and group priorities will probably make it necessary to spend much time understanding and learning from one another's views."

The conference, originally planned for 200, swelled to a registration of 400 film and video activists who clearly represented a much broader spectrum of opinion, politics, and activity than the conference Organizing Committee (OC) had originally imagined. But regrettably, many people who should have been going to the conference saw it as a low priority because of the OC's political narrowness and organizational mistakes.

BLACK PARTICIPATION

St. Clair Bourne in *Chamba Notes*, "a Pan-African oriented quarterly newsletter that deals with all film activity" (Spring '79):

> "Several serious errors were made by the Conference organizers ... I don't believe that these incidents were the result of deviousness or hard-core racism; on the contrary, these attempts, again in my opinion, to involve Blacks, even though belated, were sincere. However, they were crippled by what I term the 'progressive missionary syndrome,' that is, insensitivity and an unwillingness to include the 'victims' in on the structuring of the decision-making process for change. Frankly, I feel strongly that only after we create our own national coalition to develop our media resources/institutions can we consider alliances and joint ventures."

A number of people and organizations criticized the DC's planning, which was dominated by whites, males, straights, and New Yorkers. Some changes had already been made: an expanded definition of "Alternative Cinema" in the conference publicity stressed Third World, feminist, gay and lesbian film activity. Local meetings took place in New York, Boston, Chicago, Washington, and LA. A national advisory committee was formed that broadened representation, and caucus time was put into the agenda finally as an unsatisfactory, but necessary way of dealing with the OC not being balanced and representative from the start. As the conference opened, the Organizing Committee acknowledged its mistakes orally and in print, and it called for unity.

Bard College is a small liberal-arts college occupying a 1000-acre campus on the Hudson River, about two hours north of New York City. Sunny days, cool nights, an environment that looked like a plentifully wooded golf course, surprisingly good meals, and the hum of 17-year cicadas set the scene. The gathering ranged from practical "nuts-and-bolts" workshops and panels with information-sharing and lessons drawn from experience to large plenary sessions, which tried to find a common basis for political unity among the diverse people, organizations, and projects at the conference. In addition to a large number of film and video makers, the conference attracted people doing slide-and-tape shows, groups involved in distribution, others working in exhibition, plus a sprinkling of teachers, critics, journalists, and political organizers. Politically the group was just as diverse: from liberals working within capitalist institutions (even a Films, Inc. vice-president), to heavy rhetoric Marxist-Leninists. There was a wide range of folks, usually with years of experience in community projects (particularly Black, Chicano, Asian, and Puerto Rican film people), as well as media workers from the anti-nuke movement, anti-imperialist organizing, the

feminist and lesbian movements, labor and union work, gay organizing, and many more issues and constituencies. A fairly good regional and experiential diversity was attained by the conference's subsidizing travel, registration, and room and board fees for a good number of participants.

The schedule included plenaries (meetings of the whole conference to hear reports and decide on policy; there were no conflicting events during plenaries). Panels and workshops overlapped on the schedule so people had to pick and choose, try to catch part of two, or shop around to see what was interesting. While caucuses were scheduled for times that didn't conflict with other activities, people didn't have the chance to attend two caucuses if their interests overlapped. Meetings of particular interest groups such as people working within film and industry broadcast unions, Super 8 filmmaking, and so forth, had to take place during meal times, as did most socializing. Space and time lessened as caucusing increased and extra screenings were added at the end of long working days. Before long, almost everyone was caught up in a full scheduling of conferencing and trying to find time for recreation, reflection and solitude.

What people got out of the conference varied with their expectations, particular interests and involvement. But for almost everyone the conference provided several major areas of activity: education, contacts, mutual support and validation, political discussion, and personal and political growth.

The range of education was very wide, starting with very practical "how to do it" sessions, which provided information useful to radicals (for example, distribution and fundraising). Valuable learning took place in workshops, over meals, and in *ad hoc* gatherings where people could discuss their own experiences and those of others. Another important kind of education that took place was a two-hour presentation by the lesbian and gay men's caucuses, which explained the importance of gay and lesbian politics through an interwoven collage of personal experience, poetry, political analysis, history, and descriptions of organizing.

Many at Bard made contact with people doing similar and complimentary work. This "networking" ranged from filmmakers meeting distributors and exhibitors, to people meeting their counterparts working in similar areas (labor films, anti-nuke films and tapes). As Carlos Torre of the Chicago-based Cinta Boricua observed after the conference,

> "Contacts were made among Puerto Rican filmmakers who didn't know of each other's work or who hadn't had a chance to meet face-to-face. We planned a newsletter to keep in touch, and we made contacts with other Third World

filmmakers that would have taken five or ten years to build if left to the usual pace of things."

Closely related to making new connections and strengthening old ones was a process of mutual support and validation. Progressive film and video people face many obstacles, such as subsistence financing when available (and rarely available) — and working in isolation from other cultural workers (who usually don't share one's political concerns and activism) and often working with political activists who are often uninformed about and unsympathetic to film and video. Just getting together with other people who understood what you were doing as well as what difficulties you faced doing it, and who could offer supportive criticism was a powerful experience. Knowing that there is a radical film and video community and seeing what fine, talented, concerned, and serious people are involved, and knowing that there are still others who didn't attend, made the conference an energizing experience.

Curiously, for film people, few films were shown and those that were screened as part of the program had to compete with other film screenings as well as overcome the problem of appearing at the end of a day filled with meetings. Space, energy and equipment limitations made additional screenings hard to arrange; and only a limited time was allotted to screening work-in-progress on an interlock projector. The work-in-progress event proved to be one of the most useful, provoking extensive discussions. Many people agreed that screenings should have been handled differently. Phil Weldon of October Films observed,

> "It was a lot easier to see where someone was coming from and what their statements in workshops and panels actually meant when you could see their films or tapes."

Probably no one was satisfied with the political discussion at the conference. There was much to talk about and little time; yet the conference made political progress. Five days gave some time to establish common respect, if not always agreement. Some issues came up again and again in different forms: what should the relation of film or video maker be to the audience? to the subject matter? to the left and other political movements? Sometimes people explicitly debated these questions; other times they were implicit, but they were major themes.

What should the film/video maker's relationship to the audience be? Two different tendencies emerged. Some film/video people must reach as large and diverse an audience as possible. They stress using conventionally familiar forms, often with low-keyed or liberal politics and mildly persuasive rhetoric. For these people, wide and efficient distribution is a priority. They hope for theatrical distribution or distribution in established channels such as PBS. Since their films are usually expensive (a cost of imitating established forms and aiming at industry standards of quality), they are very concerned with getting

more money for filmmaking. Correspondingly, some of these filmmakers work in or around Hollywood or the broadcast industry, or aspire to success in established terms.

For other film/video makers, reaching the widest possible audience is not the most significant criterion for a good political film. Often these media people are addressing very specific audiences with a film or tape for an immediate use around a topical issue. The "prestige" of feature length and high production values is less important to this group, which often favors portable video, slide-and-tape shows, and Super 8. There is a tendency among these people for the process of making a film or tape to become politically important, perhaps because it seems easier when working in a more modest manner. Teaching and sharing skills, finding cooperative and collective work styles, and working closely with the people being filmed or taped take on a high value. The resulting works often depart greatly from mainstream films and tapes: militancy is shown openly, as is anger, or the film/tape may be lyrical or personal. Often the filmmaker's own views are openly expressed, and the work's politics are often much more radical than what is considered "good taste" in theatrical documentary or on PBS or the networks.

Considerable discussion took place about the film/video maker's accountability to a left community that is fragmented, localized, and often sectarian. At present radical media people are accountable in four different ways:

(1) First of all, they are accountable to their own political experience and judgment. The fact that people make progressive films and tapes satisfies their sense of social responsibility. Clearly, for a small minority of people, that's it. But most people on the left see the problems of individualism, opportunism, and careerism in defining one's political responsibility so narrowly.

(2) Thus most media radicals have some kind of political reference group or groups, which may be constituted formally or informally, which could be a collective, co-workers, friends, or other people whose judgment one respects. The quantity and quality of such feedback varies a great deal from person to person and often varies with stages of a project.

(3) Another form of accountability is to the source of one's funds. With self-funding, no one else is involved; fine, if you're wealthy. But most people are involved in raising funds, and thus they are accountable to sponsored funding institutions (NEA, NEH, state arts and humanities councils, foundations, universities, unions, the Film Fund, etc.) or to patrons, or to their audience in the sense of their "market," if they live off of income from previous work and use it to finance future work. For some this is accountability to an existing distribution business or distribution pattern. An example is the self-censorship of making the

kind of film an established distributor will be likely to handle, or asking for money for the kind of film a certain donor is likely to fund. While these forms of "accountability" can often be subverted (you can lie to get grant money), they still exercise a strong force (you can only lie so many times before they catch on).

(4) There is also accountability to the people the film is about, to the community it was made in and for, or to the movement it is for. Different people at different times argued that film/video makers need to be clear about who their audience is and whether or not the film/tape they want to make is really needed by the people it is about and by the left in general.

The question of the film/video maker's responsibility to the people depicted in the film/tape also involves concern about film/video makers sharing their skills and working toward turning the making of media over to the people who are already involved in the struggle, be that a Third World community, a rank-and-file labor group, or a feminist project. The point was made a number of times that, in particular, white, male, established film and video makers should recognize their privileged position and take an active role in sharing equipment, skills, and experience. Politics, according to this argument, must go beyond the product, beyond simply making a film or tape. It must involve the process of making and involve an ongoing responsibility to the people filmed/taped. Radicals shouldn't just "drop in" on something interesting, as TV news does. Radical media have to be closely linked to political strategy and action.

Many Third World people spoke directly to this issue, stressing that filmmakers must be closely involved with community and political struggles before, during, and after any filmmaking activity. They discussed the problems resulting from, and frequent irresponsibility of, whites filming in Black, Hispanic, and Asian communities. Lillian Jimenez, in her remarks at an opening plenary session, made the point clear: Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American people are best able to film their own struggles. Whites should concentrate on racism in white neighborhoods and institutions. The ideal situations for dealing with racism, Jimenez argued, were projects in which people worked together in multi-national, multi-class, multi-sex crews that could give attention to sharing political perspectives and filmmaking skills. However, while some people thought film/video makers should closely work with and serve the community or constituent movements, others emphasized that people being filmed can't be the only standard for the film/tape's politics. Solidarity is not enough, they said: part of the process of making the film/tape has to be working out the politics.

USING SCARCE RESOURCES

Bill Warren, reporting on the conference in the New Haven Advocate:

"The scarcity of resources also intensifies political conflicts and pressures on workers to make only films that are presently 'needed.' Errors are not only mistakes; they waste everyone's resources. A case in point was the premier of JUMP STREET (Focal Point Films, 153 Hollister, Santa Monica, CA), an excellent film by Christine Burrill, Bill Yahrous, and Dave Davis about black California prison inmates putting together a play on their outside lives in 'The Game.' While the majority praised the filmmakers' skill in humanizing the film's subjects, several black and white viewers made it clear that within the black community there is bitter conflict between working people and the pimps, pushers, and thieves portrayed. To focus on these filmed victims while ignoring the alternatives simply glorifies what needs to be attacked and confirms the prejudices of a misinformed white audience. Said a black filmmaker later, 'When I think what I could have done with $70,000 ...'"

Contradictions among the participants produced marked differences. Although though phrasing things as polar opposites here doesn't do justice to the complex interplay that took place between different factors and positions, it can provide a shorthand notation of different perspectives. One conflict arose around entrenched male privilege, sexism and heterosexism which was clearly visible at the conference and which had to be opposed in particular by the feminist, lesbian and gay caucuses. A similar conflict emerged with racism fought by the Third World caucus. As Martella Wilson of the African Film Society put it in a San Francisco follow-up meeting, "We went to a conference called by the left, and we saw that the left is racist just like the larger society."

Another contradiction appeared between those who tend to accept existing institutions and norms and work within them, and those who are trying to establish alternative institutions and norms. A clear tension grew between the small number of established and successful filmmakers and the larger number of people without "connections," privileges, equipment, and recognition. Another split arose from differences between those seeking to make films on traditionally defined political and economic issues and others who argued for the importance of seeing the political dimension of everyday life and understanding how the personal is political. Other groups also made their views known from minority positions such as: the rural caucus, which called for recognition of the third of the U.S. who live in non-urban areas; the Super 8 workshop, which argued for serious political consideration of this overlooked format; a Canadian/Quebec caucus criticizing US cultural imperialism; and a caucus of "people over thirty-five" criticizing ageism at the events. As things evolved at Bard, the logic of events favored the free expression of diversity, particularly with the emergence of strong caucuses.

NEW FACES

Clarke Taylor reporting in the *L.A. Times*, July 5:

> "'The conference took over itself,' explained Chris Burrill of Los Angeles Focal Point Films, a thoughtful and firm-spoken panelist on the opening plenary session. "We were sharing our white experience, not the Third World, feminist, homosexual experiences among us, and these (participants) obviously have the energy we had five, ten years ago. They're bringing new blood into a now older establishment.'"

Several major groups immediately recognized that their needs were not being adequately addressed by the structure and orientation of the conference. Therefore the groups began caucusing and put a great deal of work into reorganizing the events. The Third World caucus included within it separate Hispanic and Black caucuses; the Feminist caucus contained a Socialist Feminist caucus and Lesbian caucus (not mutually exclusive), and a Gay Men's caucus at times sat with the Lesbian caucus.

WHY CAUCUSES?

From the Third World Caucus Position Paper:

> "The Third world caucus of the Alternative Cinema Conference has reviewed the process and composition of the Alternative Cinema conference and has concluded that the same institutional racism that we encounter daily in the larger society has unfortunately permeated the process of the conference development ... we find that the planning process has reflected a lack of accountability to Third World people, reflects inherent racism and limits the possibility for fullest mutual exchange."

From the Feminist Caucus statement:

> "Specific feminist panels and workshops have to articulate women's problems and women's solutions in order to have a feminist perspective at this conference as a whole. We understand the way that conference structures become sexist if serious consideration is not given beforehand, about how to overcome such sexism. We want women's voices to be heard here. We want our history and experience, as well as our political analysis, to be listed to in its context. As feminist media workers, we understand the dangers of rewarding those who 'made it' at a conference like this. To structure panels and workshops with speakers already involved in "successful" ongoing organizations is to diminish the participation of women and Third World people

especially at this conference."

The caucuses and the demands they made were a necessary reaction to the most immediately perceived oppression. At the same time, there was a distinct spectrum of views within each caucus, ranging from liberal to radical. In some ways the very existence of caucuses tended to institutionalize certain contradictions and gloss over others. (This is not an argument against the caucuses; they had to be established precisely because prior political decisions of the Organizing Committee were racist, sexist, and heterosexist.) Since caucuses had to meet at the same time, the caucus structure also had the effect of exaggerating other contradictions. For example, Third World women chose to go to the Third World caucus, which in turn left the Feminist caucus racially imbalanced. And while the effective leadership of each caucus was able to deal with those anomalies and problems, it remained a case of doing the best you could with an unsatisfactory situation.

CLEANING HOUSE

From the Socialist Feminist Caucus statement:

> "It is clear to us that the structure of the conference reflects the politics of the conference organizers. That is, workshops and plenaries did not begin with explicit political issues and proceed to their application in our film work. We know that the consciousness we want our films to reflect must be born in political struggles within our communities. But this failure of the workshops and plenaries has left political definition and struggle to the caucuses, thus creating separatism and factionalism, resulting in a contradiction between the professed goal of unity and what has become a reality in the conference. Once again, oppressed peoples have been forced to use our skills to reconstruct a conference rather than participate fully in it."

Discussions in the caucuses and the resulting presentations and statements were extremely valuable and brought about a major advance in the conference as a whole. Unfortunately, the work spent in caucus was done at the expense of people missing other presentations, other conference activities, other caucuses whose concerns they also shared.

The group who came together for the Feminist caucus was quite large — about 100 women attended the first session. A very broad spectrum of viewpoints was immediately evident. Unity among the women was not ready made — that had to be worked out. The women had different interests, experiences, and politics. Some saw their primary concern with film industry struggles, some had been involved in small-scale work making films with their specific groups, and some were primarily interested in video.

Numerous political discussions and arguments surfaced as to how the women should confront sexism and relate to other oppressed groups both in the immediate situation of the conference and afterwards. Probably the two most pressing concerns in the Feminist caucus were that (a) the conference scheduling was particularly insulting to lesbians, and (b) due to the scheduling of caucuses meeting at the same time, Third World women were unable to attend the feminist sessions.

Apart from the immediate issues taken up in caucus, many women realized that they had had similar forebodings about the conference in its organizational stage — a worry that once again on the left the work and concerns of women filmmakers might not be considered legitimate or politically serious. Many successful, nationally known (primarily male) left filmmakers dominated at the organizing stage and at the beginning of the conference, and seemed to circumscribe the acceptable limits of "political filmmaking." In effect, the 100 women in the Feminist caucus developed quickly an argument and a demand for an expanded definition of politics (including the long-standing feminist assertion that the personal and sexual are political), which still seemed more than either the organizing committee or many of the filmmakers present were ready for.

Given all the problems of bringing people together, it was remarkable that people were able to come together and achieve unity. Indeed, the core of political discussion involved taking down the barriers that existed before the meeting, which had been erected even higher by the OC's action. In many ways a new group of people joined together who shared some very important characteristics. They had done political work for some time, they had done media work, and they were willing to, and in many cases already on a local level did work together with other people when a principled basis for unity could be agreed upon (or, less desirably, when a pragmatic basis for unity could be found). In many cases these people had been working in specific areas (e.g., principally within the black movement, the Chicano movement, the gay movement) and were ready here to see what could be gained from working with other radicals.

Or, to put it another way, the conference represented people who, in the wake of the fragmentation that ended the 60's movement, spent the 70's working in fairly restricted and separate areas defined by constituency and community, by sectors such as health and education, by issues such as anti-nuke and anti-imperialist work. Or, to put it another way, the conference became an exercise in that most familiar of radical U.S. political forms of the past few decades: coalition politics — building unity and activity around specific issues by a diverse and often opposed membership. And by and large, the more experienced people were very good at coalition building, and the less experienced (particularly in terms of attending national conferences) learned it very fast. What

emerged at Bard was a typical political model of our time — the small mass organization.

By mass, we don't mean massive in size. Rather, we mean a group that contains different political tendencies unified around (1) a general but pretty vague perspective and/or (2) a common issue, concern or demand (as opposed to a group that comes together around a specific well-defined political line and which then attempts to implement its analysis with specific programs. In this sense, in mass organizations people have many different reasons for working together, and each individual or group pushes its own politics while trying to advance the agreed-on goals or functions of the organization.

As the conference came to an end, numerous resolutions were put forward and accepted. The conference agreed to continue with local and regional meetings to see if there was a basis for another national meeting. Follow-up meetings have been held in New York City, L.A., San Francisco, and Chicago. The outcome of regional and local meetings will indicate how extensive plans can be made for the future. Although few would be so optimistic as to announce the Bard conference as the start of a radical media movement, it certainly established a network of and for people doing progressive work. For most who attended, it created new energy, educated about different possibilities, and raised consciousness about political issues. It showed that a lot of talented and committed people are using film and video for active political change. The conference functioned as a reference point: seeing how strong we are at the end of the 70's, we can look toward what needs to be done in the 80's.